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Peter Maas, In Perpetual Pursuit

The Author and His 'Manhunt,' The Tale of a Terrorist Scheme

By Phil McCombs
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Peter Maas is knocking back a double Jack Daniel's and talking about what it's like to be a big-time, bestselling investigative reporter and author.

"I get a very cynical view of the world in the work I do," he says. "That's why I get knocked out by a Serpico or a Marie or a Barcella. I really value these people."

They are the heroes of his books: Frank Serpico, the maverick New York cop who exposed massive corruption; Marie Ragghianti, a determined young official who fought government crooks in Tennessee.

And now Maas has a Washington hero, although the guy doesn't think of himself as one—E. Lawrence Barcella Jr., the federal prosecutor who hunted down rogue ex-CIA agent Edwin P. Wilson, now doing 52 years for smuggling explosives to Muammar Qaddafi's Libya.

In "Manhunt: The Incredible Pursuit of a CIA Agent Turned Terrorist," just published by Random House, Maas tells how Barcella stalked Wilson. The book is written in the spare, taut way of a fictional thriller.

"I have a villain and a hero," says Maas, 56, a stocky man with bushy gray hair and a manner alternately offhand and intense. "I have a writer's dream working here. I have a chase."

The story has appeared in the press; Maas presents it clearly and adds fresh detail unearthed in two years of reporting. To ship 21 tons of C-4 *plastique*, the most powerful nonnuclear explosive in the world, Wilson had an arms dealer pick it up at depots in New York, Louisiana and Texas. It was packed in five-gallon cans of drilling mud, then trucked to Houston and flown to Tripoli aboard a chartered jet.

Just a matter of the right paperwork, and a little deception.

That was in 1977. Maas says a chunk of C-4 the size of a cigarette pack could kill [illegible] and blow a hole in the side of a [illegible] He thinks some of the *plastique* [illegible] son shipped to Libya has been [illegible] in terrorist attacks, and that [illegible] it remains in Qaddafi's bunkers. [illegible] has a shelf life of 20 years.

"Barcella had stumbled over Wilson by accident," Maas writes. "As other events gradually unfolded, his pursuit became an obsession, personal in every sense of the word. The two men would meet secretly in Italy in a temporary truce. They corresponded and talked over international telephone lines, each trying to outwit the other."

The prosecutor pursued Wilson for four years, often in the face of bureaucratic indifference, finally tricking him into leaving Libya for the Dominican Republic, where he could be taken into custody. The relentlessness of the hunter fascinates Maas.

"This is a terrible town for bureaucracy," he says of Washington. Barcella—and his other heroes, too—"are not really an organization person. They don't first think, 'You gotta make a living.' "

Maas traces Barcella's freewheeling intensity to his teen-age years, when he was handed a cancer death sentence and experienced a miraculous remission that left him feeling liberated, unfettered by conventional worries about success. Now, Maas says, Barcella is a maverick who "doesn't realize it himself. He thinks he's true-blue."

Barcella said by phone that he's read the book and "it is certainly very flattering. I don't agree with everything in it . . . I certainly was not alone in either doing the work or putting the case together."

Maas is a little bit of a maverick himself. He had always wanted to be a fact-digging reporter, and when he got out of the Navy in 1955 he went to work for Collier's magazine. He gravitated toward the "investigative" side partly because he liked exposing crooks, partly because it meant he didn't have to work in the office.

"I can't work for anybody," he says now.

On Tuesday Maas spoke, along with David Stockman, at The Wash- [illegible] advance for [illegible].

"I didn't get $2.2 million for it," he says, referring to Stockman's advance. ". . . I'm not really in the big leagues." Reflecting for a moment on this modest statement, he amends it: "Well, I'm in the big leagues, but I'm not Reggie Jackson."

"Serpico" sold 2.7 million copies and brought $350,000 for the movie rights. "Marie" went to the movies for $650,000. "The Valachi Papers," which is out of print, will be reissued by Pocket Books in September.

"I never submit a written outline," Maas says. "I say, 'I've got this idea . . .' "

And the money flows.

But 22 publishers turned down the idea for "The Valachi Papers," which finally came out in 1966. "They said, 'The Mafia doesn't sell.' What I was really doing was starting a new industry. This was before 'The Godfather.' "

Mass has always been a New York guy. He grew up in Manhattan and says he likes the rumble of the city outside as he writes in the apartment he shares with his wife of three months, Suzanne Jones, a caterer.

He attended Duke University, where Clay Felker hired him for the student newspaper. At Collier's he found himself in the company of Pierre Salinger, Raymond Price (later a Nixon speechwriter) and George J.W. Goodman (now writing under the pen name Adam Smith).

In those early years Maas also worked for The Saturday Evening Post, Look magazine and The New York Herald-Tribune. When Felker started New York magazine in 1969, Maas joined the staff with Jimmy Breslin, Tom Wolfe, Gloria Steinem and others. His friend Steinem calls him a "liberated male," he says, because he "treats both sexes with equal contempt."

Over the years Maas has developed an approach to investigation that emphasizes not so much the revelation of shocking facts as the expli-